

Emily Dickinson's "'Hope' is the Thing with Feathers"

Emily Dickinson is a famous American poet born and raised in Amherst, Massachusetts in 1830. In the early 1860s Dickinson became very secluded, after loss of love. She spent most of her later years in her family home writing poems. Dickinson wrote "'Hope' is the Thing with Feathers" in 1861, which in that year alone it was said she wrote over 300 poems. Poetry helped Dickinson forget her fears in life and peruse something she enjoyed, this is reflected in the poem "'Hope' is the Thing with Feathers". The poem is one of Dickinson's most famous, because of a clever extended metaphor where Dickinson compares hope to a bird. Hope is a reoccurring subject in much of Dickinson's work, she "approaches hope through two key devices: metaphor and sound" (Robisch). This particular poem displays a sense of hope through loyalty and faith in the relationship between the speaker and hope (a bird). The perseverance of the little bird gives the speaker courage; creating an uplifting mood and leaving you considering how much hope you have in your own life.

"'Hope' is the Thing with Feathers" is written in three quatrains and is "patterned after the alternate eight and six syllable iambic line scheme (meter)" ("Hope"). In the first line Dickinson introduces the extended metaphor saying, "'Hope' is the thing with feathers--" (1). The metaphor in the first line prompts us to question, "What is hope?" (Robisch). In the first line Dickinson is suggesting that hope is more than just a feeling it is something, a bird. Next Dickinson says, "That perches in the soul" (2). Here Dickinson implies that the bird is an interior thing, something we all have inside of us. Then Dickinson says "And sings the tune—without the words-- And never stops at all" (3- 4). In this part of the stanza Dickinson elaborates the bird metaphor saying that it sings and never stops. A bird singing is commonly thought to be a comforting and beautiful tune, therefore in this stanza Dickinson is saying that hope lies inside of

all of us, always there when we need it, never stopping positive thinking. Dickinson includes imagery of a small bird singing a beautiful tune to create a positive mood throughout this stanza, and to incorporate sound. Because of the sound incorporated in this first stanza you can almost hear the bird humming a comforting sound throughout the poem.

The next stanza introduces a new setting for the little bird. Dickinson says, “And sweetest-- in the Gale-- is heard--” (5). In the worst of times the bird still sings beautifully, which is comforting to the speaker to know that during these harsh winds the bird is brave and not afraid. Then she states, “And sore must be the storm-- That could abash the little Bird That kept so many warm--” (6-8). In this stanza the little bird is not inside of the speaker anymore, but outside, where danger is near, yet it still has an admirable courage. How does this relate to hope? Even in difficult circumstances hope is there with the speaker, by him/her always. “Like the bird, ‘Hope kept so many warm’ by offering a way to look beyond the harsh reality to the promise of something better to come” (“Hope”).

The third stanza begins with the introduction of the speaker with the use of the word “I”. “I’ve heard it in the chilliest land-- And on the strangest sea--” (9-10). These lines are the first insight to the speaker. The speaker says, “I’ve” meaning that he/she has been through the terrible times described, but has heard the sweet song of the bird. Dickinson continues saying, “Yet, never, in Extremity, It asked a crumb-- of Me” (11-12). Even in the most extreme and strange circumstances the little bird never asks the speaker for anything in return, “likewise, ‘Hope’ is a joyous gift with no conditions or strings attached to it” (“Hope”). Dickinson finishes this stanza with a powerful image of the speaker looking at the bird and realizing that it needs nothing from him/her, and is truly there to serve selflessly (Robisch). Extremity is capitalized, this “punctuation may [be asking] us to look at the lines separately and slowly,” (Robisch) but above

all these capitalizations and dashes ask us to listen, and really comprehend what Dickinson is trying to say. Notice the dash after the word crumb, Dickinson is asking her readers to pause and think, then add drama to the last two words. The last word “Me” is capitalized to again add drama and emphasis (Robisch). In this stanza the speaker is a positive person, who has faith that good things will happen, even though he/she has been through many difficult times. The speaker has an uplifting tone and is talking to everyone who has ever had to fight in desperate times. The speaker wants people to realize that hope is there for them sitting in their souls, serving them selflessly, and they just have to realize it. The speaker’s strong admiration and respect for the bird, which is selfless and brave, is felt throughout the poem but most in the third stanza.

“‘Hope’ is a thing with Feathers” has connections to Dickinson’s life, and the time period when the poem was written. This poem presents the idea that the inside is safe and comfortable, but the outside world is unpredictable and dangerous. That idea is very similar to Dickinson’s life, she was afraid of the harsh world so instead she stayed inside and secluded. Even while she was discouraged by her social disabilities she is able to find hope through writing her poetry. Considering the time period it is probable that Dickinson was very influenced by the transcendentalist movement. “‘Hope’ is the Thing with Feathers” describes each person’s inner goodness, like transcendentalism Dickinson “offered a hopeful view of humanity even as America was sliding into the darkness and despair of the Civil War” (“Hope”). It is possible that Dickinson’s speaker is offering hope to Americans involved in the Civil War, or even maybe hope for America as a whole. Another possible connection to the real world in this poem starts with faith. “Christ and the ‘Hope’ that he gave the world were repeatedly figured in traditional emblems as a bird” (Wolff). So, is Dickinson making a reference to faith by comparing hope to a bird? No, although hope from Christ is often pictured as a bird “nothing in the poem suggests

that Dickinson was referring to Christ” (Wolff). Although the audience is unclear the popularity of this poem is irrefutable. Is this poem worthy of its fame? Critic Jane Donahue Eberwein believes that the poem “analogy breaks down in a puzzling conclusion with its absurd assumption that hope might ever go begging for help” (Eberwein). While each critic has their own opinion, it is important to recognize all the great ideas of the poem. While hope is necessary at all times, it is most important during trying times. The theme of perseverance by the brave little bird is reinforced repeatedly throughout each stanza with lines like “Yet, never in Extremity, It asked a crumb of Me” (11-12). The overall mood of “‘Hope’ is the Thing with Feathers” is uplifting, the speaker wants to help people hear the little bird and become hopeful in times of adversity. The lesson to take away from this poem is to always have faith and never give up in difficult times. With the use of figurative language, imagery and sound Dickinson made “‘Hope’ is the Thing with Feathers” a memorable masterpiece with lessons that are still crucial today.

## Works Cited

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